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ABSTRACT

This issue, containing a special report on abuse, contains stories by sexually abused youth and an abusing parent. The stories emphasize the difficulty children have being believed when they finally decide to share their problems; the difficulties they have getting help; and the fact that, even if the abuse is stopped, there are no simple, happy endings. Interspersed among the true stories are suggestions for getting help when one is in an abusive situation, both from West Virginia agencies and from national hotlines. Books about abuse are suggested. Also included is a report on teen input into a bill on predispositional diagnostic groups, which will affect the placement of every child who becomes part of the West Virginia welfare system. Youth participants sponsored an amendment to make child and parent participation in the child placement team mandatory. (DHP)

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Step by Step

Creative Expression by West Virginia Youth

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I found out it was wrong because one day my teacher showed a film about a little girl going home from school and her mother wasn't there but her father was. She was scared to death of him because he was always beating her and getting on top of her. It showed him on top of her and he wouldn't get off of her. The next day she came to school all beat up. She showed the places to her teacher and told what he was doing to her. They were telling her that what he was doing was wrong. I had thought I was the only one this was happening to. I cried over the film. I didn't know what to do. It was always in the back of my mind

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#1 Spring 1990

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In this issue:

--Special Report on Abuse
--Youth amend legislation
--Upcoming events

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Step by step, the longest march,
can be won, can be won.
Many stones, can form an arch,
singly none, singly none.
—Traditional

Step by Step

The following West Virginia youth have conducted interviews and research in the workshops that produced the stories in this publication: Maria Adams, Sharon Adkins Mary Jane Bowles, Kim Caim, Abbie Hicks, Mike Hupp, Rhonda Jackson, Carl Kondrach, Lori Mercer, Elizabeth Stover, John Stover, Debbie Thompson, and Melissa West.

Illustrations: Aaron Vest
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Step by Step Director: Michael Tierney

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Listening

"This part says 'may'--that means they don't have to talk to us at all."

We were just sitting there talking about legislation that might affect West Virginia youth, when one workshop participant focused on a particular clause. Words like "may" have been used to deny him input in many of the decisions that affected his life--12 placements in as many years in the state's child welfare system. He wanted to make sure that in the future, people who make such decisions would at least have to see and hear kids face to face.

The purpose of Step by Step is to listen to the stories and ideas that emerge from young people's lives. We hold workshops to help youth reflect on their own experience and to encourage them to listen to each other. They inteview people and write about the challenges they face.

Sometimes the talk leads to action. The above mentioned bill was amended with language written by youth who visited the legislature on Children's Issues Day (see article pp. 14-15.) The bill was tabled for this year, but the youth involved have pledged to return in 1991, and have been invited to meet with officials of the Department of Human Services to discuss ongoing input by young people into departmental policy.

When a conversation about the lack of real skills training in summer jobs programs was shared with Concord College President Jerry Beasley, he invited Step by Step to develop a proposal. This spring, teens from Mercer, Summers and McDowell counties, particularly young parents, will make plans for the Concord Youth and Family Opportunity Corps, for which Concord hopes to receive support from the Governor's Summer Youth Program.

The special report on abuse in this issue is a particularly good example of the power stories can have in people's lives. Missy Cole lived through a seven year nightmare of sexual abuse until seeing the story of another girl helped her realize she could seek help. She submitted her story to Step by Step in the hopes that her experience might make the difference for someone else. We are grateful to the people who shared their stories here and have also changed their names. We also respect their privacy.

The stories we gather convey no clear cut path. They are raw and they raise more questions than they answer. Sharing, and hearing, them can be painful. But there's a power when people realize that they are not alone, and an energy released by such honesty that can move things.

If we listen.

--Michael Tierney, Step by Step Director

Abuse

a Step by Step special report

Missy Cole

You don't have to live that way

When I was born, I lived with my real mother; then when I was one year old, I went to live with my Aunt Kim. I loved living with them. They were very good to me, and I was so happy. When I was seven years old, my real mother came back and took me away with her. She was married to a man named David. He was good to me, and I called him daddy. I was very happy.

My mother started running around with other men, and he started running around with other women; so they got a divorce. She married a man named Steve. He was mean to me and my brother. He got drunk all of the time. He put my brother on the stove and turned on the gas. We had to take him to the hospital. She ended up getting another divorce.

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for referrals in
incidents of child abuse
and domestic violence

She married a man named Kevin then. He got drunk a lot, and so did my mother. Kevin beat me all the time with his fist and his belt. My mother never said anything to him or made him stop, because she didn't care. She was always drinking with him and my grandmother. I started drinking, too, and taking drugs. I didn't go to school very often.

I would go to bed early so he wouldn't beat me. One night my mother was gone and I went to bed. I locked my door, but he knocked down the door. I screamed because it scared me. He started cussing me, and then he got on my bed and told me if I told anyone he would shoot me; and then he raped me.

He left my room because he heard my mother coming home. I was crying, and he told my mother that I just had a bad dream. I didn't tell anyone that he hurt me because I was scared that he would shoot me. I was only seven years old when he first started doing that to me.

After that, he raped me every day it seemed; but sometimes he would just feel around on me. Sometimes he would tell me to come into the back room and rub his back. I would cry and tell my mother I didn't want

to, but she would say I wasn't sick and to go on and do it any way. He would put his hand over my mouth; he wouldn't leave me alone.

I can remember being put in a room, given a pee pot, and food being pushed under the door for me to eat. I would be left there for days. I was always told that it was because I was mean, but I didn't think I had done anything wrong.

If you are being sexually abused, please tell somebody. It will be the best thing for you to do. You shouldn't have to live that way.

My Aunt knew what was happening. She lived right beside of us. I told her what Kevin was doing to me, because I thought she would tell my mom; and it would be easier for me. She said, "Missy it is none of my business. It is your's, your mother's, and Kevin's. I do not want to get involved, because Kevin will kill me." It was never talked about again. I was so mad at her, I cussed her out; and she knocked me in a corner.

Her son lived with us a lot of the time or over at her house. When he knew I was alone, he would come over and tell me I had to do him a favor. He would have sex with me. I guess I was so used to Kevin doing it to me. I liked my nephew. He was 15 and I was 8 years old. I never told anyone what we were doing. It went on until I was 13 years old.

I found out it was wrong, because one day my teacher showed a film about a little girl going home from school. Her mother wasn't there but her father was. She was scared to death of him, because he was always beating her and getting on top of her. It showed him on top of her, and he wouldn't get off of her. The next day she came to school all beat up. She showed the places to her teacher and told what he was doing to her. They were telling her that what he was doing was wrong.

I had thought I was the only one this was happening to. I cried over the film and felt so depressed for months. I had always thought it was the right thing for Kevin to do to me. I didn't know what to do. It was always in the back of my mind.

I went home after I saw the film. The next time Kevin started messing with me, I told him it was wrong. He cussed, beat me, and said it wasn't wrong. I finally got fed up with the beatings and him hurting me, so I and went to school and told my teacher. I felt real scared, and I knew he would really hurt me now; but I couldn't take it anymore. I did tell everything, and they believed me. They called my social worker, Mrs. Smith; and she came to school. They showed her my bruises and told her what I had said. She said not to worry, to go on home on the bus, and she would be there when I got there. I was so scared, I told my girlfriend. She was so scared for me, that she went to my house with me.

My stepfather, my two grandmothers, my nephew, and my mother were there. The social worker was in the back room talking to my mother. Kevin made my girlfriend go home. He started cussing me and saying that I was lying. He was so mad that he took a hammer and hit me on the head. Then my mother and social worker came running into the room. My mother told Kevin to stop or they would take me away. The social worker told me to come into the back room. I went passed Kevin, and he hit me with

something. The social worker talked to me for a little while and then took me outside and told me to stay there until she went across street to my aunt's house to call police. I got cold and was afraid, so I went back inside. Kevin started cussing me again.

My mother just sat there; she didn't seem to be worried at all. The social worker came back in, and Kevin said that the next person who comes in the door "is going to get their head blowed off." I was scared that he would kill us all except his mother. I knew he wouldn't hurt her, because she was the one who gave him money. His gun shelf was right beside him, but the next person in the door was a policeman. He told Kevin that he wasn't going to kill anyone because he was taking him to jail. They took him away and took me to the hospital.

They took a lot of x-rays, asked me a lot of questions, and wanted to know if I had been raped. I told them no, and the social worker said I told her I had been. After that, they took me to a shelter.

I didn't know anybody at the shelter, and I was afraid. I really didn't get much help there, maybe because I didn't even want to think about what had happened to me. I kept running away, but I never ran away alone. Always, one of the other girls would leave with me. I kept running away, and the police would catch me, put handcuffs on me, and take me back. They would always ground me, but I didn't care. We had group once in a while; but I didn't talk much, so it didn't help me very much.

I hated everybody. I wanted to kill Kevin, and I tried to kill myself by cutting my arms with a razor blade. They took me to a mental hospital. After that, I still ran away. Finally, they took me and put me into a foster home about 100 miles away from where I did live.

I have tried to write to my mother but she answered only one of my letters. I have seen her once since I left. My foster mother and I went to the Department of Human Services office and sat in a room with another girl and her mother and visited with our mothers. It was nice. I was very glad to see her. She hugged me and brought me a pair of yellow tennis shoes. I wish I could be with my mother, but I know she will not leave Kevin.

If you are being sexually abused, please tell somebody. It will be the best thing for you to do. You shouldn't have to live that way.

If you know someone this is happening to, you can help them by telling them not to go home; to call the police; or if they have a social worker, call her. Tell them it is not their fault, and that there will be people who will believe her. It will help her to feel better about herself.

If my daughter ever tells me something like this, I will believe her and stand beside her.

Getting help

Getting help when you are in an abusive situation requires persistence and a number of different strategies. The people we talked to discussed the frustrations they had in getting people to believe them, in getting local agencies (where they exist) to respond to their needs, and in being informed about what was going to happen to them next. All of them stressed the importance of keeping at it until someone believes and helps you. Finding a friend, a teacher, a pastor, or a local support group (for women, for victims of abuse, or for children) who can stand by you can make all the difference. In West Virginia, if you are a professional (teacher, health worker, etc.) and you suspect someone under 18 is being abused or neglected you are legally obligated to notify the Department of Human Services.

Suggestions made by the people we interviewed included:
--Find a school counselor, teacher, neighbor, or adult friend who can help make contacts.
--Call the nearest domestic violence shelter to find out what resources are available.
--Call your local Department of Human Service office to find out what their procedures are in cases of abuse.

The following are resources to help people who are being abused:

WV Child Abuse and Neglect, Adult Abuse, Domestic Violence Hotline (1 800 352 6513) --can provide numbers for local domestic violence shelters, the state's two shelters for youth that take walk in referrals, local Department of Human Service offices, and local, state, and national chapters of groups that fight abuse.

West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence (304 765 2250) The network for the state's 13 domestic violence shelters, most of which have child advocates.

Friends for Prevention of Child Abuse (formerly West Virginia Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse and the WV chapter of Parents Anonymous) Call collect, statewide, **(304 345 6676)** has a 24 hour crisis line, provides groups for parents who abuse or have the potential to abuse, and also lobbies on children's issues.

National Hotlines:

National Domestic Violence Hotline (1 800 333 7233) provides referrals to shelters, legal services, and counseling for persons in domestic violence situations. They have a computer system that can bring up the three nearest shelters to any town in the US. They also have reference manuals for referrals to the nearest Child Protective Services, and counseling on sexual assault and incest.

National Child Abuse Hotline (1 800 422 4453 M-F 6 a.m.-10 p.m. Pacific Time) can provide crisis counseling and referrals.

Parents Anonymous (1 800 421 0353)

Learning about abuse:

The following are suggestions of books to read to learn more about abuse. Encourage your local school or public library to include them in their collection:

--Ellen Bass, Laura Davis The Courage to Heal New York: Harper & Row 1988

--Martin Dell Battered Wives Revised edition, San Franciscio: Volcano Press, 1981

--Susan Shechter Women and Male Violence Boston: South End Press 1982

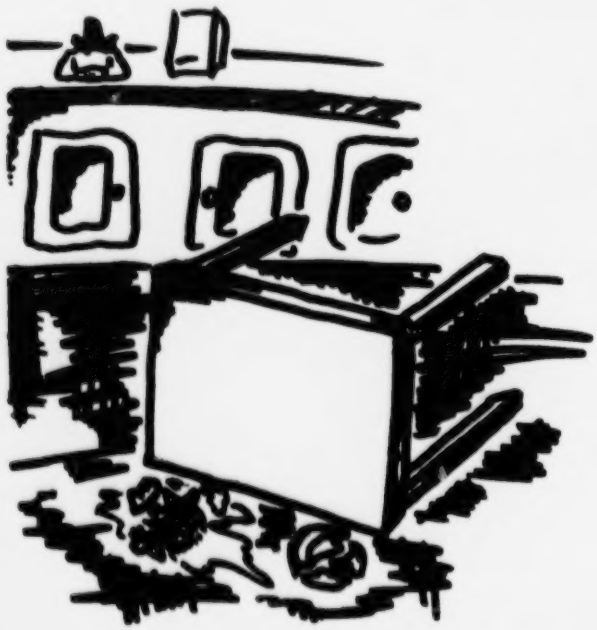
References courtesy of West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence

Janet Walker
"People don't believe kids"

I was abused different times as a child. I was sexually abused as a child by a family member but also was a victim of date rape. I was molested by my brother-in-law when I was 12. My sister was about eight months pregnant. My thinking was that he was doing that because she doesn't feel good. So I internalized it and put it all on myself.

Then when I told someone else in my family, which was my mother, she just said I was to stay away from him. That made me be in charge, which further victimized me by saying that it must have been my fault: "you were around him; you must have created that."

He would give a look and you knew what was on his mind or what he wanted, so it always made life very uncomfortable until they moved out of state. I just couldn't understand why somebody would want to do that to me. I was very much tom-boyish; I didn't understand it at all. It left a lot of confused feelings. And then being the victim of a date rape, I didn't go home and tell, because I knew my mom and dad would say, "well you got into the car, its your fault."



So living like that as a kid meant feeling that I was less than anybody else, that there was a label above my head that said I was second class, that I was dirty, there was something wrong with me. It made me not want to put my whole heart into what I was doing. I accepted whatever was dished out to me, saying, "I must deserve this."

I didn't get any help when I was a kid. It's hard enough now for us to get people to believe kids; it was even harder then. They didn't believe anybody. Everything was always covered up in families. You know, everybody had an Uncle Joe in the family that usually got drunk a couple times a month; and he beat his wife, Martha, but you know...he's a good guy, so everybody buries it. That was the type of attitudes when we grew up. You kept everything within the family and you didn't tell those outside. People didn't believe kids.

Then the nightmare came around. I ended up marrying somebody that abused my children. Every day at our house was like walking on egg shells, because you never knew what he was going to be like. You never knew whether you were going to be killed that day. My daughter got pushed down the steps and books thrown at her because she didn't put the shampoo back where it belonged. I was beat up lots of different times. The police were called. It didn't do any good. I've been burned with cigarettes. I've had knives to my throat. The final blow was looking at a gun right here, and that was when I said: "that's it."

Only after that did disclosure come of my daughter saying what he'd done. I didn't know that at all. (continued on next page)

(continued from previous page) There's no mom in our group that actually saw the abuse. But what they will tell you is there is such a feeling of something wrong that you don't know what it is. My daughter did not tell me because he was so violent. She knew I would do something and she figured he would kill me.

So with that happening, I happened to call the right person at the right time, which was my older sister. She was on the phone with me every night to make sure that I lived through the initial crisis. That is where we started to get all the appropriate things going so that the kids could get into therapy, that I could get into therapy, and that I could change some thinking also.

I'll have to say I was screwed-up too. I had a lot of screwed-up ideas. I didn't sexually abuse my kids and I didn't condone it. But I lived in the household with him and I enabled him to carry on his rotten behavior, so I have to accept the part that I played in this dysfunctional family.

It's so important to take both mom and dad through a program to change. It's to stop us from re-offending. He offended one way, and I offended another way. As far as being molested as a child, I became a controlling person. I wasn't mean to them, but I had such a discipline that if I snapped my fingers, they had better move. That's wrong to do that. I instilled fear in my older children. I've not done it to the other ones. I've learned different ways to handle things. It took years for us to get there, and it's going to take a long time to get out.

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Bill Thomas

Trying to take responsibility

I started when I was a child. I abused my sister. As I got older, when I was dating I would abuse the girls I dated. I was after what I wanted, not necessarily what they wanted. Once I got married I didn't really listen to what people were asking...what my wife was really after.

I abused my kids...after my own selfish reasons. I can't really put a why to it. That's a tough question. It's what everybody asks. "Why did you do what you did"? It just boils down to that was the way I chose to deal with what I saw was going on; and what I saw was going on was just my perception.

Our family was isolated, and I did that by keeping everything in the family. I told the kids, "you don't go outside the family and talk about things. The family will handle their problems." That shut them off from having friends outside that they could say "you know this is happening to me, and I don't know whether it's right or not; because I have to assume it's happening in every family."

When I was growing up it was the same. We didn't discuss family problems outside the family. I learned at a real early age, whatever mom said, that's what I did. If she said "be quiet" then I was quiet. (continued on next page)

It takes courage: a Step by Step conversation about sexual abuse

Step by Step's interview workshops engage youth and concerned adults in discussions of tough issues. The stories of Janet Walker and Bill Thomas were edited from a workshop with members of Parents United, a self-help group for families who have experienced sexual abuse. The following is an excerpt from that conversation:

SBS: Don't you feel like, or haven't you ever felt like you should be locked up somewhere?

Bill: I faced it early on when I yet had a choice whether I wanted to face what I was doing or whether I wanted to jump off a bridge. Anybody who's done this and is honest with himself has to face that, and I consider myself a stable person. That is not a solution...it's not a solution. I can't provide for my family if I'm dead. That re-victimizes them. I've put my kids through enough. I'm not going to put them through that.

Janet: If he doesn't admit what he did he'd have no rights at all. But if anybody wants to change, then the right of other human beings is to give that person the opportunity to do that. Not at the expense of hurting somebody else. As long as he never hurts anybody else, he's got a lot of people that will support him. We do have offenders that come to group, and they're only allowed to stay so long and not admit. We don't have a bit of compassion for them. They're not let off the hook. We will do everything in the world to lock them away forever, even though, we know what the experience is ourself. We'd be the first one to push it, we'd be the first one to say that yes they need to go to jail, because then it's real.

SBS: It's a simple fact that it makes people that it's never happened to scared. Scares you to love anybody or trust anybody because it can happen. I mean I can't forgive anybody that.

Janet: We're not going to tell you that you can, because I'm not going to forgive the person that did that to me. I don't think it is necessary that I forgive him, but I'm very much pleased that he's in a program. I know that for me, as far as working with him, I can accept who he is because I can accept what's happened to me and how it happened to me. My own reasoning is that to me to get him to the point where he changes, that he can be here to do this. It is not easy. This is not the best subject in the world. Nobody wants to deal with it... just bury it! But we're not going to get anywhere if we keep burying it. So it takes a little bit of courage. It took courage for a child to endure, to live it, to have to live in a house with an offender, to be sexually abused. It takes courage for the offender to want to change, because he is uncomfortable with change. All we want from people is to take some of that courage to face this issue. Because it takes courage to get better.

(Continued from previous page) If I felt like saying anything, I didn't let mom know; because to me that was dangerous; I was going to get hurt. I could see other people's emotions; but I felt that if I was angry, I couldn't tell mom I was angry. If I was happy, I could tell mom I was happy; because that was what mom wanted to hear. She wanted to know that I was happy, but she didn't necessarily want to know that inside I didn't feel comfortable with everything.

I was from a dysfunctional family but I had a problem admitting to myself that it was abuse. I felt uncomfortable with some of the things my parents did with me because there was a valid reason for it. That reluctance was already there at the age of nine; and it's still there for me to say that I was uncomfortable with what they did. There was someone else outside the family that exposed himself to me and it scared me to death when I was about eight or nine. I can think of a lot of situations outside of the family. Inside the family, I have a hard time because my mom and dad, to me, did what they thought was right. I can't judge mom and dad. To me, they tried.

I first exposed myself to my two oldest girls when the oldest one was four and the next oldest one was three. Then I exposed myself to them again when they were about ten. The oldest one was about that age when I started touching her, and I concentrated more on her I guess.

My younger daughter, when she got to be ten, that's when I started touching her. It just repeated itself. I repeated myself. It's not an it, it's me. At the same time, I was still touching my oldest daughter. I told myself that what I was doing was right. I could do this and control it. I was teaching my kids that this is how a male deals with female and it was controllable. I could control it because I could stop, and I didn't think that other people could. This is the rationale that was going on, but it wasn't right...I wasn't right.

I didn't touch the boys. Right now, sitting in group with men that abused their daughters and their sons I'm asking myself if I would have. Is the reason I haven't abused my sons is because they weren't at the age that I thought that it was proper for me to teach them whatever garbage that I had in my head?

I did not come out and say don't tell, but in my actions, the way I treated them, I let them know that if they did tell there would be serious consequences for them. I set up thinking that everything stays inside the family. That tells a child if I take this outside, it's something I don't know how to handle. They deal with what they know they can live with, and they've been able to live with what's happened. "Maybe it will go away," is some of the things, I guess, they say.

I think they believed that there was some reason. Everybody wants to feel that. I do. There's a reason things are happening to me, and I'm in control of my life. I don't think a child sees it as that; that there's a reason that things happen to me, and so that makes them take on the responsibility.

I was forced to go into counseling. I was called at work and told the Child Protective Services wanted to talk to me. Immediately, I told myself, "Ok, I know what's up. Its finally out...what I've been doing." I didn't want to admit what I'd been doing. I didn't want to sit in front of a group of people. I didn't even want to talk to one person and tell them what I'd been doing, and I called

my wife to find out what was going on. I already knew, but I wanted somebody to tell me what was going on so that I could have the pat answers. She told me it was about the girls and that was the extent of it. She didn't have to tell me any more.

I went in...scared. Finally the interviewer got around to "are you abusing your children"? That's when I decided: "Ok, it's time for you to come clean or try to cover it up," and I couldn't do that so I said, "Yes," and they referred me to an offender's program. They told me they would take this information to the prosecutor's office, and they would decide what to do to me. I guess I was so scared that what was going on there didn't really make any difference to me, because I saw, maybe for the first time, how much I had really hurt not only other people, but myself. I saw myself differently. I saw myself as not a nice person. What I was doing was wrong. Well, at that time I couldn't put a specific what's wrong...now I'm getting to where I've got some specific what's wrong. It's wrong because it makes the kids feel that they are inferior, that they had to respond, they have no control over what other people do to them, and that's not true. I'd like my kids to understand that they have a right to say "No, I'm uncomfortable...I feel uncomfortable."

They told me that I wouldn't be out of the home more than the three to six months. I don't know what would happen, because for me, that was something that wasn't endurable. I can live with three to six months, I can live, I can go, I can learn. I can live with three to six months; then it gets to be a year and now it's been almost two years. That's because I didn't change my way of thinking. I'm still trying to control my family. I'm working on that. I made a choice when I talked to the Department of Human Services. They gave me the choice of staying home or leaving, but it wasn't put to me the right way. I had a choice of how to take that and say I care about me and I want to stay where I'm comfortable, or I care about my family and get out...and that's what I did.

I didn't come forward voluntarily and I've been educated enough to know I would not have stopped. I don't want to ever abuse again. I have choices to allow me to abuse, so what I'm trying to do is avoid situations where I would feel like I would be tempted. I can't guarantee ...I wish I could.

I have to change what I think. It's for selfish reasons. I have to change for my own good, because I have not been honest with myself. That's the way I go. I can't fix what I've done. There's no way that I can fix it. All I can do is see to it that I don't do it again. That's all I can do, and I can't guarantee that will happen.

If I could pick a why, then I'd have a solution and I'd have to quit looking, and I can't do that; because if I quit looking then I'm saying "Ok, I'm healed. I don't have anything to worry about now." I've got a lot to worry about, because it's how I feel about people...whether I trust people or not... what I see as the way a person is going in the future...what I think somebody is going to be...how I think they should be, which I have no right to do even with my kids. Right now, that's where I am. To me...I've assumed an awful lot.

I hope that after I get out of this program, I can live in the world and be responsible for what I do. I think that's really the bottom line... being responsible for what I do.

Sherry Myers

Losing myself in the "perfect woman"

I believe that one of the most trying times of my life was when I was dating an abusive guy who insisted upon breaking my will with force. At the time I viewed the situation as one brought about by my own laziness and ignorance, but now I see it as one in which I grew to overcome his oppressiveness and my insecurity.

When he first became oppressive, I felt that my personality needed to be altered. His cruel words and brutal deeds made me believe that I was at fault and I began to view him with the greatest of respect, almost reverence. His every whim was my command, his every utterance--my principle. From behind his vicious words and violent attacks he was my hero, breaking my evil and foolish ways and creating a picture-perfect woman--subservient to men and their needs in every way.

Creating a perfect woman meant isolating me from many things that my boyfriend viewed as evils. Suddenly, I found myself unable to be with my friends alone. He wouldn't let me read or go shopping. Being his girlfriend meant being at his side at all possible moments and only engaging in actions that met with his approval. To stray from his "guidance" was to invite his brutalities, and so I resigned myself to being only "his girlfriend" and to slowly losing my most valued possession, myself.

One evening, while enjoying a quiet dinner alone in my home, he grew more violent than ever before. Pushing me to the floor, he tore my clothing from me and raped me. I screamed out in pain and in anger as he fulfilled his desires. He left me lying on the floor, dressed quickly, and left. I lay on the floor and wept. I felt terrified violated, terrified and alone.

Time for me passed slowly in the next few weeks. Allowing him to rule me had allowed for the destruction of my personality and confidence. I had lost my ability to survive without him thinking for me.

I tried to regain my status as the happy-go-lucky type person that I had been before my ordeal, but I failed. My peers noticed and suspicions arose as to what my failed relationship had done to my life. Fearing that they would uncover the bitter truth surrounding my abuse, I fled my friends and retreated into the shell of a girl that I had become.

A few months passed and I retained my silence under the suspicion that what had occurred had been my fault--every bruise, cut, and evil word was self inflicted because of my foolishness. But one night my silence was broken. As I lay in my living room watching television, waiting for my parents to come home, a face appeared in the window. The face was angry and drenched with the cold rain that was beating down outside. The face was that of my former love. I arose and walked towards the window, but fear gripped my soul and in a fearful rage, I rushed to the phone and called the police.

When the police arrived, I told them everything about my past relationship. Every vile detail of my abuse spilled forth . Someone besides me knew of my pain and I no longer felt enslaved. The police stayed with me and when my parents arrived home, they supported me as I told my parents of my troubles.

My parents wanted to believe me, but accepting the idea that they had an abused daughter was overwhelming. My mother wept and my father chose to ignore the situation. I felt that I was to be faulted for being victimized. I pulled into myself, locked my feelings deep inside me and went on, alone.

Finally, I met a young man who was a

true gentleman in every aspect. He was kind, compassionate, and eager to become close to me. At first I shied away from him, feeling as if the rape had left me unworthy of sincere intimacy. I feared that his act of compassion and patience would suddenly vanish to reveal brutality.

Fearful that the knowledge of my sordid past would drive him away, I kept my silence. In the quietness of my soul, I longed to tell him of my abuse, but the fear of his possible leaving kept me silent. Withholding

my past from my boyfriend was not easy. I was thankful for a situation that allowed me to break my silence.

A close friend of my boyfriend's had also been the victim of abuse. My boyfriend, knowing no way to help her, turned to me and asked me, as a female, to please talk to her. Being more skilled in the field of domestic violence than he was aware, I thought that I could help.

In talking with her, I was able to relate things from my past to things she had recently undergone and open up in a way that I had previously not been able to do. A mutual healing took place as she and I talked, laughed, and cried. I came to realize that my life did have worth as I befriended her in her time of need. A trust formed between us and I began to recover my self esteem that had been taken from me during my oppression.

My boyfriend noticed the change in his friend after a few days, asked me what I had said to her. My fears once again welled up inside me, but knowing that I must be honest with him, I spilled forth my entire story. As I allowed every detail to pour forth from my heart, I felt a heavy weight being lifted from my mind. No loner did I have to hide behind an intricate network of lies. the truth was out and I was free.

As I talked, tears spilled from my boyfriends eyes. He could feel my pain and knew my anguish and allowed me to finish my story without a word. As the final details of the story were made known, I felt naked--my whole soul lay before someone I had known intimately for only a short while. Knowing that the next few minutes would be tense, I muttered, "If you do not want to be around me, knowing the things that you do, I'll ask you to leave right now."

The next few minutes were tense as we sat silently staring at one another. Suddenly he rose and began to stride towards the door. As he walked away, I felt angered. The emotions he had displayed as he listened to my story were meaningless. Maybe I wasn't the perfect person he thought I should be he was leaving.

As he reached the door, he called me to join him. I walked to where he stood. Opening the door, he pointed to a full moon that was shining in the sky and said, "As sure as the moon will always shine, I will always be here for you." He hugged me and I wept. Not because of the flowery words: I would have preferred it if he had just sat there and told me he'd stick around.

When I talked with another victim of abuse, I knew I was not alone. I told her you can survive. And I believed it about myself. Finally telling my boyfriend made me realize why I appreciate our friendship. I can be open. I finally felt accepted for me, not the perception of somebody else.

Youth in Action

West Virginia teens amend child welfare bill

Five West Virginia youth visited the legislature during the recent session to make their views known on current bills. During this process, they wrote, sought sponsorship of, and saw passage of an amendment to the "Pre-dispositional Diagnostic Bill (Senate Bill # 70) that would affect the placement of every child who becomes part of the state's child welfare system.

The amendment was developed in the course of preparation for and participation in Children's Issues Day at the legislature on February 5, 1990. Each year the West Virginia Children's Issue Advocates sponsor the day to "focus legislators' attention on the critical needs of West Virginia's children." The day included an address by Governor Gaston Caperton, lobby training, a legislative update for the general public, and meetings with individual legislators.

Statement to Senate Judiciary Commitee

A lot of support has been shown for Senate Bill #70 by many of the youth that it would affect. We would like to air some of our feelings as to why we feel this bill should pass.

1. Youth are being placed in facilities before the facility or the social worker has had sufficient time or information to make a correct and accurate assessment and/or decision regarding the youth's placement.

2. Many placements are being made because it merely fits the state's, the courts, and Human Services' needs. While these placements are convenient, many are not necessary.

3. Many social and child-care workers do not know the youth well enough, and in some cases have never even met or spoken to the youth to form an opinion on what kind of treatement or placement, if any, is needed for the youth.

We stress this point very much because the youth's emotions and personality cannot be read, nor judged on paper. There are many cases where there may have been another factor that has contributed to the probelem that others are unaware of, such as sexual, physical, or mental abuse.

We feel that while this bill will not change everything and will not make every unfortunate situation like these unavoidable, it will have a strong impact and will help the state focus on the youth's needs and not the state's convenience. What is the state's convenience compared to a child's life, which could be ruined because of a misplacement that was a result of somebody's negligence of the factors that caused the problem? This bill, amended as we have suggested, will give the many unfortuate child victims of society more input in the control of their future.

--Carl A. Kondrach, Spokesperson, Step by Step

As preparation for the day, youth participants reviewed bills at one of Step by Step's monthly workshops. The purpose of Senate Bill 70 was to "provide a system for evaluation of minor children prior to their being placed for long periods of time outside their homes by court order." The bill would set up teams of local representatives from the Department of Health and Human Resources, social services, the community behavioral health center, the county board of education and the circuit court.

Workshop participants noticed a clause that stated "the child and parents may be invited to participate in all proceedings deemed appropriate by the team members."

On Children's Issues Day they sought sponsorship of an amendment that added that the child "shall be allowed to attend a meeting and present his or her views on placement prior to the team's making its final recommendation to the circuit court." The following morning, three youth returned to make a statement to the Senate Judiciary Committee in support of the bill and saw their amendment passed.

The bill was tabled in the Senate Finance Committee for this year, but will include their amendment when it is introduced for the 1991 session. In addition, Director of the Bureau of Social Services of the Department of Human Services, Harry Burgess, has announced that he will implement the team model proposed in the bill in six to ten counties in West Virginia this year. He has also invited young people to meet with him to discuss further input into the child welfare system at a workshop to be sponsored by Step by Step this summer. (see announcement below.)

Coming from Step by Step

WV Youth: Holding on to Home

In the next year, Step by Step will sponsor a writing contest for high school age youth to explore:

--their sense of place, what it means to have grown up in West Virginia

--their sense of the future, for themselves and the state

To spur discussion, we have purchased copies of "Holding on to Home," the tabloid reprint of the landmark 30 article series in The Charleston Gazette, which we will make available to individual youth and in sets for classroom or group use.

The contest will be in two stages:

Spring 1990: essays, drawings and photographs are due by June 1. Winners will be published in Step by Step and take part in a writing workshop with "Holding on to Home" author Nancy Adams and novelist Denise Giardina (Storming Heaven)

1990-91: a series of activities will culminate in the publication of a major collection of stories, photographs and drawings on growing up and facing the future by West Virginia youth.

Workshops

One Saturday each month, Step by Step sponsors a discussion, writing and interview workshop in Charleston. Workshops run from 10:00-3:00 with an hour break for lunch. Participants must agree to respect the confidentiality of all those attending. We will try to help with transportation. Upcoming topics include:

April: Youth Perspectives on Alcohol and Substance Abuse

May: Teen Parenting

June: Youth Input into the Child Welfare System: a discussion with Director of the Bureau of Social Services, Harry Burgess.

July or Aug: Youth Build America-- We have joined a national coalition to develop programs that will train youth in the construction trades as they build and repair housing for the homeless.

Exact times and locations will be determined by those who pre-register using the form on the next page.

Subscribe!

Step by Step is published three or more times per year (depending on contributions and funding) and is available:

___free by individual subscription to any West Virginia Youth.

___free in bundles for group and classroom use.

___for a sliding scale donation (from free to whatever you can contribute, suggested donation $15) to concerned adults.

If you would like to be placed on our mailing lists for future issues and announcements of Step by Step activities, please fill out this coupon and mail it to our editorial address, listed below:

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Get involved!

Please check below if you would like to attend or receive further information about any of Step by Step's workshops and other programs.

Saturday workshops:

___Alcohol and Substance Abuse
___Teen Parenting
___Youth Input Into the Child Welfare System
___Youth Build America

___WV Youth: Holding on to Home Writing and Art Contest
___Concord Youth and Family Opporunity Corps (including summer 1990 jobs program)

All Step by Step staff and volunteers undergo the criminal investigation, confidentiality, and abuse and neglect clearances required by the Department of Human Services.

Contribute!

Articles on your experience and concerns will be welcomed for future issues of Step by Step. Suggested topics have included articles on divorce, economic challenges, substance abuse, suicide, AIDS, volunteer and community action experiences, and many more. Confidentiality is assured, but please include your name and suggested pseudonym on the manuscript.

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